



>> “When analyzing a 911 homicide call, the investigator’s primary question should be, ‘Was the caller requesting assistance?’” Adams and Harpster wrote in the FBI publication. “If not, why not? Was the individual simply reporting a crime? Almost twice as many innocent callers (67 percent) in this study asked for help for the victim than did guilty callers (34 percent).”

Investigators also should look at the relevance of the information the caller provides, Harpster said. Most of the guilty callers deceived by omission instead of bold-faced lies. The information they provided in many cases was confusing, extraneous and mere rambling instead of clear details.

“People who provide more information than necessary may be attempting to convince someone of a deceptive story rather than simply conveying truthful information,” the report states.

Additionally, those who provided information that was incorrect and never made any effort to correct themselves were proven guilty in every instance of the study.

Harpster and Adams also suggested investigators should be wary of callers who have a negative attitude toward the victim. Blaming the victim or casting insults should be red flags. In their study, Harpster and Adams gave an example from a father’s 911 call, where the parent reported his 4-year-old-daughter needed medical assistance.

**Telecommunicator:** Do you know what’s wrong with your daughter?

**Guilty caller:** Not a clue.

**Telecommunicator:** Has she taken any medications?

**Guilty caller:** Maybe. She’s very, very sneaky. She threw a huge temper tantrum earlier. She might have taken something.

Five percent of callers in Adams’ and Harpster’s study blamed or insulted the victims and each were proven guilty, the report states.

### VOICE MODULATION

Hearing the caller’s voice gives investigators an advantage if they understand how to interpret the tones, speed, pitch and volume in that person’s speech.

“How someone delivered a message can offer as much insight as the message itself,” Harpster and Adams wrote. “... Emergency situations demand urgency, and previous studies of homicide statements have

shown that the presence of emotion indicates veracity.”

For instance, Harpster offered the example of a mother who awoke to find her infant child had suffocated during the night. During the 911 call, the mother — innocent of any involvement in the death — began screaming at the telecommunicator when she thought the paramedics were taking too long to reach her child.

“Thirty-seven percent of the callers in the study made urgent and demanding pleas for help, and each was innocent,” Adams and Harpster wrote. “This finding was the strongest indicator of innocence in the study.”

In contrast, callers who are uncooperative, who repeat themselves, interrupt themselves and change the direction of the topic were found to be guilty of the crimes in most cases.

“Thirty percent of the callers in this study used self-interruptions, and each was guilty,” the report states. “This was the second-strongest correlation with guilt in the study.”

“What happens is, when an innocent or guilty caller comes upon a dying or dead person or victim, there is a lot of stress on that person,” Harpster said. “Whether they are innocent or guilty, there is a lot of stress. And when they call 911, that stress gives us clues and insight about whether they are likely the offender or not. Primarily — at this point — this is a tool to help detectives form an investigative strategy.”

### CONFIRMATION

Investigators in Minnesota and Pennsylvania, however, have used the tool to confirm that their investigations were on the right track.

In Eveleth, Minn., Eveleth Police Chief Brian Lillis attended one of Harpster’s training seminars about two to three weeks after a suspicious death in his jurisdiction.

“A convicted felon made a 911 call,” Lillis said. “A few months earlier he had been released from prison for involvement in a murder. He had moved in with a woman after his release from a halfway house, and within about a six-week period, she ended up dead.”

The woman had fallen down a flight of stairs while heavily intoxicated. The combination of the fall, previous injuries that